

Letter from David Ben-Gurion to his son Amos, written 5 October 1937

Obtained from the Ben-Gurion Archives in Hebrew, and translated into English by the Institute of Palestine Studies, Beirut

5 October 1937

Dear Amos,

I was not angry at you, but I was very sorry indeed that there was no reply from you. I cannot accept the excuse that you have no time. I know you have a lot of work at school, in the field, and at home, and I am happy that you are so preoccupied with your studies. But it is always possible to find free time if necessary, not only on Sabbath days but even during weekdays. Your excuse that I keep moving from one country to another is not convincing. You can write to me in London. Here they [the Jewish Agency office] always know where I am, and they are efficient in forwarding my mail. As to the question of my membership in the executive committee [of the Jewish Agency], I shall explain to you in person if I meet you in Tel Aviv upon my return. Here what I want to talk about is the conflict you are experiencing between your reason and your *emotions* with regard to the question of the state. Political matters should not be a question of *emotions*. The only thing that should be taken into account is what we want and what is best for us, what will lead to the objective, and which are the policies that will make us succeed and which will make us fail.

It seems to me that I, too, have "emotions" [quotation marks in original. Hebrew: regesh]. Without these *emotions* I would not have been able to endure decades of our hard work. It definitely does not hurt my feelings [regesh] that a state is established, even if it is small.

Of course the partition of the country gives me no pleasure. But the country that they [the Royal (Peel) Commission] are partitioning is not in our actual possession; it is in the possession of the *Arabs* and the English. What is in our actual possession is a small portion, less than what they [the Peel Commission] are proposing for a Jewish state. If I were an *Arab* I would have been very indignant. But in this proposed partition we will get more than what we already have, though of course much less than we merit and desire. The question is: would we obtain more without partition? If things were to remain as they are [emphasis in original], would this satisfy our feelings? What we really want is not that the land remain whole and unified. What we want is that the whole and unified land be Jewish [emphasis original]. A unified Eretz Israeli would be no source of satisfaction for me-if it were Arab.

From our standpoint, the status quo is deadly poison. We want to change the status quo [emphasis original]. But how can this change come about? How can this land become ours? The decisive question is: Does the establishment of a Jewish state [in only part of Palestine] advance or retard the conversion of this country into a Jewish country?

My assumption (which is why I am a fervent proponent of a state, even though it is now linked to partition) is that a Jewish state on only part of the land is not the end but the beginning.

When we acquire one thousand or 10,000 dunams, we feel elated. It does not hurt our feelings that by this acquisition we are not in possession of the whole land. This is because this increase in possession is of consequence not only in itself, but because through it we increase our strength, and every increase in strength helps in the possession of the land as a whole. The establishment of a state, even if only on a portion of the land, is the maximal reinforcement of our strength at the present time and a powerful boost to our historical endeavors to liberate the entire country.

We shall admit into the state all the Jews we can. We firmly believe that we can admit more than two million Jews. We shall build a multi-faceted Jewish economy-agricultural, industrial, and maritime. We shall organize an advanced defense force-a superior army which I have no doubt will be one of the best armies in the world. At that point I am confident that we would not fail in settling in the remaining parts of the country, through agreement and understanding with our *Arab* neighbors, or through some other means.

We must always keep in mind the fundamental truths that make our settlement of this land imperative and possible. They are two or three: it is not the British Mandate nor the Balfour Declaration. These are consequences, not causes. They are the products of coincidence: contingent, ephemeral, and they will come to an end. They were not inevitable. They could not have occurred but for the World War, or rather, they would not have occurred if the war had not ended the way it did.

But on the other hand there are fundamental [emphasis original] historical truths, unalterable as long as Zionism is not fully realized. These are:

1) The pressure of the Exile, which continues to push the Jews with propulsive *force* towards the country

2) Palestine is grossly under populated. It contains vast colonization potential which the *Arabs* neither need nor are qualified (because of their lack of need) to exploit. There is no *Arab* immigration problem. There is no *Arab* exile. *Arabs* are not persecuted. They have a homeland, and it is vast.

3) The innovative talents of the Jews (a consequence of point 1 above), their ability to make the desert bloom, to create industry, to build an economy, to develop culture, to conquer the sea and space with the help of science and pioneering endeavor.

These three fundamental truths will be reinforced by the existence of a Jewish state in a part of the country, just as Zionism will be reinforced by every conquest, large or small, every school, every factory, every Jewish ship, etc.

Our ability to penetrate the country will increase if we have a state. Our strength vis-à-vis the *Arabs* will likewise increase. The possibilities for construction and multiplication will speedily expand. The greater the Jewish strength in the country, the more the *Arabs* will realize that it is neither beneficial nor possible for them to withstand us. On the contrary, it will be possible for the *Arabs* to benefit enormously from the Jews, not only materially but politically as well.

I do not dream of war nor do I like it. But I still believe, more than I did before the emergence of the possibility of a Jewish state, that once we are numerous and powerful in the country the *Arabs* will realize that it is better for them to become our allies.

They will derive benefits from our assistance if they, of their own free will, give us the opportunity to settle in all parts of the country. The *Arabs* have many countries that are under-populated, underdeveloped, and vulnerable, incapable with their own strength to stand up to their external enemies. Without France, Syria could not last for one day against an onslaught from Turkey. The same applies to Iraq and to the new [Palestinian] state [under the Peel plan]. All of these stand in need of the protection of France or Britain. This need for protection means subjugation and dependence on the other. But the Jews could be equal allies, real friends, not occupiers or tyrants over them.

Let us assume that the Negev will not be allotted to the Jewish state. In such event,

the Negev will remain barren because the *Arabs* have neither the competence nor the need to develop it or make it prosper. They already have an abundance of deserts but not of manpower, financial resources, or creative initiative. It is very probable that they will agree that we undertake the development of the Negev and make it prosper in return for our financial, military, organizational, and scientific assistance. It is also possible that they will not agree. People don't always behave according to logic, common sense, or their own practical advantage. Just as you yourself are sometimes split conflicted between your mind and your *emotions*, it is possible that the *Arabs* will follow the dictates of sterile nationalist *emotions* and tell us: "We want neither your honey nor your sting. We'd rather that the Negev remain barren than that Jews should inhabit it." If this occurs, we will have to talk to them in a different language-and we will have a different language-but such a language will not be ours without a state. This is so because we can no longer tolerate that vast territories capable of absorbing tens of thousands of Jews should remain vacant, and that Jews cannot return to their homeland because the *Arabs* prefer that the place [the Negev] remains neither ours nor theirs. *We must expel Arabs and take their place*. Up to now, all our aspirations have been based on an assumption - one that has been vindicated throughout our activities in the country - that there is enough room in the land for the *Arabs* and ourselves. But if we are compelled to use *force* - not in order to dispossess the *Arabs* of the Negev or Transjordan, but in order to guarantee our right to settle there - our *force* will enable us to do so.

Clearly in such event we will have to deal not only with the *Arabs* living in Eretz Israel, since it is very probable that *Arabs* from the neighboring countries will come to their aid. But our power will be greater, not only because we will be better organized and equipped, but also because behind us stands a *force* still greater in quantity and quality. This is the reservoir of the millions in the Diaspora. Our entire younger generation of Poland, Romania, America, and other countries will rush to our aid at the outbreak of such a conflict. I pray to God that this does not happen at all. Nevertheless the Jewish state will not rely only on the Jews living in it, but on the Jewish people living in every corner of the world: the many millions who are eager and obliged [emphasis original] to settle in Palestine. There are not millions of *Arabs* who are compelled or willing to settle in Palestine. Of course it is likely that *Arab* adventurers and gangs will come from Syria or Iraq or other *Arab* countries, but these can be no match for the tens and hundreds of thousands of young Jews to whom Eretz Israel is not merely an emotional issue, but one that is in equal measure both personal and national.

For this reason I attach enormous importance to the conquest of the sea and the construction of a Jewish harbor and a Jewish fleet. The sea is the bridge between the Jews of this country and the Jewish Diaspora - the millions of Jews in different parts of the world. We must create the conditions that will enable us in times of necessity to bring into the country in our own ships manned by our own seamen, tens of thousands of young men. Meanwhile we must prepare these young men while they are still in the Diaspora for whatever task awaits them here.

I am confident that the establishment of a Jewish state, even if it is only in a part of the country, will enable us to carry out this task. Once a state is established, we shall have control over the Eretz Israeli sea. Our activities in the sea will then include astonishing achievements.

Because of all the above, I feel no conflict between my mind and *emotions*. Both declare to me: A Jewish state must be established immediately, even if it is only in part of the country. The rest will follow in the course of time. A Jewish state will come.

My warm greetings

When do you return to Kadoorie [agricultural school]? Write to me. Show this letter to your mother and sisters.

Sincerely,

Your father